

## *Afterword: Secrecy & Cultural Relativism*



BETWEEN THE PREMODERN ABSOLUTISM of ritual secrecy, coded in utopian and millennial worldviews, and the neoliberal democracy that invented cultural relativism, there is the voice of anthropology. In the modern period, this voice was reflective of the intellectual promotion of relativism—the cherishing of cultures as contextual systems of beliefs and practices, each having its own integrity and dignity, worthy of respect wherever they are found. Though many challenges to this modernist paradigm have emerged over the decades, none has been more misunderstood in anthropology than the meaning and practice of secrecy. What of the absolutist side?

All-or-nothing initiation means to rule and share in secret reality—or else to be excluded and die: ritual secrecy is such a totalizing social strategy. That is the cultural lesson of these comparative ethnographies. Men employ threats and war to rule a society at war, through the production of an alternative cultural reality of initiation rituals in the nerve center of the men's house. Such a rule is not just or democratic; it has nothing to do with the law in the neoliberal sense. It is fragile and tenuous, this hold; and so it lasted only as long as the warfare; and when colonial agents entered Melanesia these secret systems were challenged and began to dissolve through pacification, missionization, and external hegemony.

Cultural relativism was vital to anthropology's scientific idealization of secrecy in the comparative ethnography of New Guinea societies. The contradictions in the ways that secrecy was suspect but promoted in American government and culture as hegemonic to the cold war, the issue of

being a male ethnographer studying conditional masculinity that depended upon ritual secrecy in societies such as precolonial New Guinea, the social inequalities that typified these societies before and after colonialism, and the omission of sexuality, homosociality, and a concept of male desire from these ethnographies merit reflection in this Afterword.

Surely at the heart of the neoliberal worldview against secrecy is the pervasive historical attitude that secrecy is opposed to democracy, that it harbors selfish, subversive, or antisocial interests in opposition to the collective good. Let us review the main reasons for these negative attitudes of Western bourgeois society. First, there is the libertarian attitude: the individualism of privacy is sacred, whereas the collective form of secrecy is perceived as a cabal that undermines free expression of individual rights and thus goes against democracy. Hence, privacy is good, secrecy bad. Second, the civilizing process can never be supported by privacy, much less secrecy; culture is public (i.e., rational), ritual is secret (i.e., irrational); therefore secrecy cannot be the basis for society or culture. Third, secrecy is a ruthless and anticivilized form of power; it is strongly associated with the “primitive” and the “unconscious,” and is thus disruptive of democracy (see chap. 2). Fourth, in science as well, where hypotheses are falsifiable, method is public, and truth is a primary aim, “secrecy has no permanent place in this form of scientific enterprise” (Mitchell 1993: 31). Democracy and civic life, in this modernist project, must be open and married to the rule of law—all that is unsecret.

It is no coincidence that cultural anthropology in the United States, following the influence of its institutional founder, Franz Boas, and his illustrious protégés Kroeber, Sapir, Benedict, Lowie, and Mead, created a discipline committed to the ideals, if not in fact the practice, of democracy. Generally these great scholars were opposed to racism and critiqued prejudice. Of course, like all the social sciences of the times, anthropology harbored its own blind spots and elitist tendencies, including heterosexism and homophobia (Weston 1993), standard for the times. In this early-twentieth-century scientific worldview, democracy and freedom were thought to be foundational and transparent; secrecy should not play a part in any of them. The social reality was more complex. Moreover, anthropologists had staked a claim on the “culture concept,” one of the greatest orienting ideas of twentieth-century social study; and all through the period up to the end of the cold war, anthropology advanced the cause of culture as a “good thing” that was open and served as counterpoint to the

“bad things” of the cold war itself—the culture of secrecy created through East/West antagonism in society, science, and art (Moynihan 1998). It must be noted, again, that certain anthropologists worked for military or secret government organizations, typically unknown to their colleagues (di Leonardo 1998). Was this a kind of conditional anthropology?

Furthermore, it was this secret and nefarious activity by researchers, anthropologists included, that had gotten the Academy into trouble during the high imperialism following World War II that was to include Project Camelot in Latin America, counterinsurgency work in Thailand, and a variety of questionable undertakings related to the Vietnam War (di Leonardo 1998: 237). For myself, it was unthinkable in the early 1970s that I would work as an anthropologist in a totalitarian or repressive regime, such as Irian Jaya under the colonial occupation of the Indonesian army, an occupation supported initially by the United Nations and implicitly warranted by the United States. However, I was thrilled by the idea of working in a Papua New Guinea men's secret society of the kind my professor, Kenneth E. Read, had lectured about in class. The seeming contradiction between the refusal to work in oppressive states and the enthusiasm of working in a traditional secret society did not present itself, nor did we see the apparent contradictions between the condemnation of secrecy in cold war State policies and the participation in premodern ritual secret societies. These systems were perceived to be radically divergent realities: the one was a regime of terror and state oppression, all too familiar as American military actions in Vietnam; the other strange and exotic, its rituals marginal to these larger global conflicts, having little or no resemblance to contemporary neoliberal society. Understanding these contradictions and their permutations in anthropology and social study has motivated this book.

Secrecy is a mode of sociality—a particular kind of social relations that creates and reproduces an order of rule of men over women and children in public and a means of reality-making by men with men in secret. The subjectivity of this sociality creates alternative shared reality precepts and concepts, even hidden objects of desire—the ontology of the men's house in certain areas of Melanesia. Secret cultural reality is therefore a critical political project, not unlike utopian movements of the modern period, albeit restricted, premodern, and prestate. Why then have anthropologists, especially male European anthropologists, so often typified these formations in pejorative ways?

Seen as a totalizing system, folding into itself the inequalities and injustices of a closed, nontransparent hierarchy, male rule through ritual secrecy in precolonial Papua New Guinea societies was tenuous but fierce in its proclamations of reality and utopian power. After the fall, the obliteration of the men's house, its rituals and paraphernalia, with only remnants remaining for the anthropologist to pick up, it is hard, as we have seen illustrated in this book, to understand how such a system could operate effectively. To observe the unraveling of these systems is unnerving; it destabilizes the positionality of White male ethnographers—in the field and in their texts.

Moreover, instead of making “the future” or futurism in a state formation, a.k.a. “nationalism,” its *raison d'être*—emotions and cognition that are closer to the form of performative modern masculinity in the West—the New Guinea men's house took a different direction. Its reasoning, as characterized by Whitehouse, is unlike “the doctrinal mode of religiosity” (1995: 201). Male ritual secrecy was more revelatory in character. It was given to grapple with problems of religion and social life that were inherent in war and the Ideal Man mythology, imported wives, and sons who were mistrusted offspring of these marriages. Masculinity was created through intense ritual male homosociality that assured local rule by men, however tenuous, on the condition that their performances of masculinity conformed unfailingly to the rules of the secret game.

Masculinity was then subtext and pretext, foreground and background, for ritual secrecy—and the kind of conditional secrecy, so tough, so fragile, found in these societies required performances that were specific to context, actors, aims, audiences, and goals. That is, the habitus of masculinity was relational and deconstructed through ritual and then rebuilt through verbal teaching and emotional revelation and dietetics of absolute taboos and renunciations. Eros and desire could not escape this absolutism; initiation means the socialization of secretly taught desires. Even the location of this habitus in the men's house was successful only so long as its emotional climate was reproduced through the continuous threat of external war, the presence of willing warriors with human desires that included sexual outlets, and, among the Sambia and Baruya, the commitment to secure rule through the reproduction of objectified sexual relations with boys and women. In this social formation women were forever excluded and alien from this secret cultural reality, at least ideally, and probably more often than we should like to think, in reality.

Ritual secrecy in New Guinea created one form of subjectivity in

secret, and another in public social life, the men's house being the final means of articulation between these two discordant realities for the men. This model implies the precondition of a firm, unshifting male hierarchy, elders and war leaders, ritual experts on top, adult men in the middle, younger men below them, with boy-initiates at the bottom of the totem pole. This model was not secret; it was the ritual knowledge, objectification and subordination, and, in the instance of societies such as the Sambia, the sexual relations between older and younger males that were hidden absolutely from public view, and whence derived male rule in public. In societies that had neither substantial material differences nor strong "egalitarian" ethics, this was no mean achievement. Men's ability to cooperate in the public domain (which included domestic spheres, such as the women's houses, where women and children resided) was all-important. Their ability to manipulate their secret knowledge, to do performances for public consumption, to be able to exercise through secret subjectivity tactics and stratagems of control over women and other men who were key players in the men's house—all of this reproduced the social order through the shared project of ritual secrecy.

The contradictions and moral dilemmas of the men operating in dualistic worlds now seem obvious—though they were not to the anthropologists of a generation ago. However, Burridge had it right: Moral dilemmas implied "dissonances in basic assumptions in power. These, in turn, can be seen in stresses and strains in social relations, and are particularly expressed in the prestige system in terms of which the worth of man is measured, integrity earned, and redemption gained" (1969: 163).

Imagine other social worlds in which the measure of a man is the esteem of his mates in the pub, the Elks Club, the clique of hunting cronies who once a year go to the woods of Maine to recapture childhood dreams; or those who kneel and pray in a circle of sacred reverie; and another that seeks solace in a Victorian club of Greek-admiring practices, made up from the bricolage of Indian rituals and half-forgotten legends like those of Morgan's invented society. Now when you add war to the mix, as was the case in New Guinea—the life and death struggle to rule in shifting sands of uncertain allies and enemies—you begin to understand how vital, how necessary, how burdensome, and ultimately how fragile ritual secrecy was the achievement of this fierce masculinity out of the circumstances of ordinary men (Mead 1935).

In his final work on the Ilahita, *Revenge of the Cassowary*, Tuzin (1997) refers to the utopian project of conditional masculinity by the metaphor of

a “haven” of protection. I will not quibble with this characterization; surely it applies to the social circumstances of Morgan and his male cronies in American society long ago, as it also pertains to the Iron Johns of today. But I would add that the stakes are high in war, and they go up when war is the final arbiter of life and death; the middle-class language of choice and nicety connoted by the term *haven* seems weak and insufficient to convey the deadly resolve of a society in which the constant sense is that “a war is going on” (Herdt 1987a).

Indeed, in the Middle East today, in a country such as Israel that feels itself besieged, the kind of masculinity and the kind of extraordinary measure called for make secrecy almost a certainty—a means of promoting trust to feel protected against enemies, inside and out. That surely is one lesson that follows from the horrible impact of September 11 and the terrorist destruction in New York—a new cold war and secrecy have followed in its wake. Conditional masculinity is the product of such dreadful disasters—a deep, floundering sense of dis-ease in the land. Secrecy was the artifice in New Guinea, but not necessarily by choice; whatever pleasure men derived from the excitements of secrecy and the incitement to perform its rituals, ritual secrecy reflected their uncertainty, fear, and unfaith in male rule in public affairs, or the hegemony of their particular men’s house in local struggles. This utopianism represents their yearning for a hidden, pure, fundamentalism of shared certainty.

The human suffering of these end games of war thus precipitated the classic rituals of birth and rebirth of manliness and servile masculinity, known from decades of study since Van Gennep (1960) and anthropologists who were to follow in this tradition. One form involved boy-inseminating rituals; the other did not. These traditions were the product of vast historical and material forces, ultimately disruptive of the social order; the rituals were an attempt to tidy up. The insemination of boys, clearly a practice found in only a small number of the thousand and more Melanesian societies, was, however, emblematic of the homosociality and high phallic reverence for the male organ, itself iconic of the Ideal Man—incomplete and vulnerable without the dietetics and semen of older men.

### *Review of the Lessons of Ritual Secrecy*

The cultural lessons of ritual secrecy are revealed through the case studies examined in this book. Sambian men faced the dilemma of the potential

betrayal of their sons, which they handled by universal conscription and brutal ordeals to sanction secrecy, ultimately bending the mind of the boy through insemination, bonding his substance to the secrecy of ritual. The Yagwoia men were humiliated by the loss of their sons and their empire to colonizers and missionaries, and had made ritual secrecy a secret from their progeny. And the Gahuku-Gama in their attempt to reproduce a “*nama* cult”—a social construction of K. E. Read’s anthropology—found themselves the objects of their spirits, not the free agents that they promoted in their rhetoric to women and children. The Baktaman constructed their ritual secrecy as described by F. Barth through the metaphor of numerous nested Chinese boxes that fade into empty or meaningless practice, completing a circle of failed or lost truth, out of the fear that the truth will be discovered by women, making them too powerful. And then there is M. Godelier’s certainty that the Baruya could never do without their semen rituals in the quest to arrange material domination over women and boys, though the men still cannot escape the terrible fear that they shall be betrayed. Finally there was the lesson of the Iahita, the discovery, witnessed by ethnographer D. Tuzin, that ritual secrecy is performative only—it is “what men do”—not the invention of a high god but an artifice of greed and lust by those who prey upon their own families while masked to impersonate this sham god. Such are the political and moral dilemmas of sociality in a particular civilization. In short, these societies had their own spoiled social relations, internal contradictions that produced bad faith, and desperate counterhegemonic fundamentalism determined to survive in the turmoil of relentless, pounding warfare. Such themes are all too familiar in human history, even if the ritual secrecy is not.

That was the precolonial pattern. The advent of the colonial powers ushered in a brave new world. It was not devoid of secrecy, local peoples thought, as they attempted through cargo cult beliefs and practices to interpret the “unintelligible foreign morality” (Whitehouse 1995: 26) and actions of Dutch and German, Australian and British rulers. These White men seemed to have their own secret means and clubs, their own warriorhoods with more powerful, indeed awesome, technology, and seemingly unlimited material wealth at their disposal. As Lattas has so cogently written: “Whites here are rendered as running their own men’s house cult, the secrets of which serve to masculinize them while feminizing Melanesian men” (1999: 73). From Governor-General Van Baal on down to the common barracks policeman, a bond of homosociality connected the Whites,

and while New Guineans could never know the fragile quality of this frontier life and its slight hold on civilized masculinity in the heart of darkness, so, too, the foreign rulers feared uprisings and the contagion of "savagery," driving them to destroy ritual temples and icons, to jail cult leaders, and to preemptively strike at locals who resisted making the land safe for missionaries (Keesing 1992).

Viewed in historical perspective, such accounts exoticized and thus removed the study of secrecy from the realm of self-reflection that is the hallmark of ethnography. The exoticization of New Guinea cults (e.g., *The Island of Menstruating Men*, Hogbin 1970) was a means of removing secrecy from serious analysis and comparative study, and thus ultimately from cultural critique. To interpret ritual secrecy as a lie or hoax, or primarily as a sham or game, was to underrate the wonderfully terrifying complexities of Melanesian precolonial life. A kindred point can be taken from cargo cult studies: Western anthropologists who were unable to accept the desire for materialism per se may have been prone to interpret cargo beliefs as morality plays in the manner more acceptable to Western views (Lindstrom 1993). Likewise, by underanalyzing ritual secrecy, or by treating it as individual or contractual, ethnographers may have ignored the social contradictions of these sociocultural systems, so rich and intricately layered in public and secret subjectivities and practices. Moreover, in the cases of Hogbin and K. E. Read, the dynamics of male secrecy and sexuality, that is, the homosexuality (and/or heterosexuality) of the ethnographer in a colonial period of disrupted local rule and compromised masculinity, remained hidden from the text. How could it have been otherwise? As sociologist Connell has suggested of my work and other similar New Guinea studies, the construction of masculinity through boy-inseminating practices disrupted the very notion of homosexuality as unmasculine (1995: 31–32ff.). To interpret the result primarily as a gender game or "war of the sexes," in the cliché of the times, was only partially correct when viewed against local idiom (Herdt and Poole 1982). Even in the world of Lewis Henry Morgan, as we have seen, the veil of ritual secrecy was a social barrier invoked by men, indeed, enjoyed by them, in their tenuous extension of rule.

Conditional masculinity, as I have iterated, relies upon initiation ceremonies, hierarchy, embodiment, and male solidarity, to operate social relations in public successfully. "Success," in this formulaic, means the ability to rule through the exigencies of a secret order to meet the challenges of war and enemies, inside and outside the polity. Treachery, for example, as

Godelier (1989) has well written, was such a constant threat that only the culture of secrecy could succeed as a general weapon to counter it, the men thought. Of course on the side of cultural richness the rituals and secrecy of initiation and its revelations continually invoked all throughout the life cycle of men added a measure of grandeur to these stark realities.

But how is masculinity connected to secrecy in this model? An important clue to this question comes from K. E. Read's (1955) classic formulation of "morality" in Melanesia, which influenced an earlier generation of thinking about comparative morality and ethical relativism in anthropology and religion. The discussion of universalism and relativism by Read, via detailed comparisons of Gahuku-Gama and "Western" moral categories, was couched almost exclusively in the male-centered language and masculinist imagery of his day. Unfortunately Read did not explicitly deal with the link between masculinity and ritual secrecy. Instead, ritual was treated as but one of myriad social and relational attachments that made the category of the person and "his" conduct situational or context-specific. On one occasion Read discusses "unmanly" conduct in relation to "appropriate" behavior for Gahuku men, saying that while there are rules, the Gahuku expressed a "continually changing moral perspective" (1955: 261). Even homosexuality, Read suggested, was treated as "foolish rather than immoral."

Moreover I do not think that Read or his generation, including his friend Margaret Mead, for instance, as expressed in her brilliant meditation on gender, *Male and Female* (1949), ever made the connection between secrecy, masculinity, and male rule writ large. Morality was morality—a *man's* responsibility, whether applied to men or women—and never mind that the tropes and measures of rhetoric about moral development were construed through masculine or heterosexist frameworks (Gilligan 1982). That was not how gender was understood, when it was thought about; as a prefeminist or pre-gender relations analysis of the issues showed, masculinity was more physical and material.

But why secrecy? To return to the rhetoric of chapter 2, by deconstructing masculinity as less of a thing and more of a relationship, with power embedded in ritual bonds, it was then possible to imagine two kinds of masculinity—the public and the secret—or what Lattas has referred to as "the lived experience of a double existence created from living secret worlds of underground meanings" (1998: 289).

Lewis Henry Morgan, the scholar who pioneered these studies, again

provides a lead case. Now it seems more obvious that Morgan and the men of his age faced the dilemma of their own desires in the creation of men's secret societies. Clearly, Morgan was in search of another kind of society or fraternity, through a higher, purer, finer, and more elemental sort of social manhood provided for by his own cultural age. *Utopian* is the proper word for that higher state on earth. We know little of his wife or family relations, and Lewis Henry Morgan was later to remain silent about his experience of ritual and adoption among the Iroquois. His reflections were never published; he seems never to have reconciled his young manly desire for secret homosocial fraternity with male American peers, or to have explained his later adoption by the Indian tribe. We can only speculate that his ventures first into pseudo-Greek ideals and then into the Iroquois initiation lodge left him with an increasing sense of existential ennui, or perhaps alienation. Still, he persisted with his ethnology and the extraordinary effort to do justice to the cultural ways of the Iroquois, while remaining a member of the cultural world of frontier America.

Then something shifted in Morgan, as if having realized a dream or desire, an equally strong pulse to deny it or to leave it behind seized him. The impulse momentarily leads him to belittle his own cultural production, the Order of the Iroquois, as a "boyish" thing. Perhaps having felt closer for a moment to the rituals of the Iroquois, though purchased, and make-believe, the disingenuousness of the white male practices or his fantasies about them shone through and disturbed him. Perhaps Morgan's "gift" of secret societies to his peers alienated the owner from it. Nonetheless, this sudden alteration of desires was accompanied by a newfound intellectual interest to write about the Indians as a substitution for living among them. Morgan's intellectual interest in the Indian came to fruition in his grand book *The League of the Iroquois* (1851), and while Morgan became a public intellectual, his role in building secret societies became a secret.

Morgan was the quintessential Victorian in this double and compartmentalized existence. Ironically, he was also a lawyer—that most cunning of market-driven creatures, whose exploitation of the growing political economy of what I have called contractual secrets, or some would call legal secrets, must not go unnoticed. Indeed, legal studies define secrecy as the intentional withholding of information from another person, to their disadvantage, with the result of "bringing some people together while pushing others apart" (Scheppelle 1988: 16). Thus, this eminently intelligent man became cynical of his own youthful dreams and even dismissive of

secrecy thereafter. Men such as Morgan were aspiring not only to cast aside the remnants of the premodern era, including religion; they were, as Maurice Godelier (personal communication) has reminded me, attempting to assert science and anthropology as the very zenith of human civilization and, as Freud liked to say of psychoanalysis, the pinnacle of reality-making. Morgan's contributions and his interest in secrecy only enlarge the distinctively American qualities of this great man. His work presaged the challenges and compromises experienced by many anthropologists in the next century—and in this sense his life anticipated the moral dilemmas of anthropology. The humanity of Morgan is enlarged, not diminished, by this history.

I hope that by now it is obvious that men and women in the precolonial era of New Guinea societies typically did not construe secret rituals the way that the modernists who succeeded Morgan did: as fraud, lies, fakes, or simply as a grab for or abuse of power, and hence, moral corruption. Gender relations must of course condition such a claim, for as we have repeatedly seen, the interests and power of men and women differ in these societies. This antirelativist theme in the interpretation of ritual secrecy folded into its persuasion old colonial critiques of traditionalism and custom with postcolonial critiques of Christianity and its missionization (Lattas 1998). The United States and Western Europe have more recently viewed secrecy in the light of cold war and state secrets on the international plane, and as a problem in moral contracts (more precisely the failure to keep contracts secret), contracts defined as the forerunner to commercial agreements, created between lawyers and clients or doctors and patients, tolerated but not celebrated by neoliberal society. In general, Americans are wary and mistrustful of the use of secrecy, especially when illegal or anti-social ends are suspected, whether by criminals or the CIA (Moynihan 1998). Surely conspiracy theories would not be so popular otherwise. As Roland Merullo has cautioned about America's "secret culture," however, we are too big to be "encapsulated in a sketch of Uncle Sam: We are something more than a capitalist demon and something less than the Statue of Liberty" (2002: 19).

### *A General Theory of Secrecy*

Throughout this book I have proposed a general theory of secrecy that posits the creation of cultural reality, or alternative conceptions of reality,

as the central and driving force behind the institutionalization of ritual practices in small-scale societies over historical time. I have suggested that we reflect upon our own Western notions of secrecy, which are largely negative and cynical, being the manifestations of liberal democracy and other views of individualism and collectivism, which assume full disclosure of all aspects of personal and social life. A reexamination of the role of secrecy in precolonial New Guinea societies reveals the need to value the uniqueness of cultures in the tradition of cultural relativism, while also understanding the fundamental dilemma of individual actors' lived experience in a secret tradition marked by contradictions on the cultural level and conflicts on the interpersonal one.

This is true in a general way, but what of its practice in anthropological fieldwork? The fact is, secrecy presents a special challenge to cultural relativism and the epistemology of anthropology, particularly as this is understood in other cultures. Some skeptics will wonder if my emphasis upon the cultural functions of secrecy amounts to an apology for the abuses of secrecy, whenever or wherever they occur. Is this but another instance of anthropology's failure to take ethical positions in their ethnographies of other cultures (and possibly their own)? No, I do not think so.

The historical survey of theories of secrecy (chap. 2) found both positive and negative meanings of secrecy in social study, but it is the Machiavellian view of secrecy that haunts anthropology. Like Simmel, I do not entirely disagree with it. Rather, I find its logic and images incomplete, as in fact Simmel did: aside from the potential for power, he saw the solidarity-enhancing potential for the group and protective functions of secrecy for the individual, even though he also understood that secrecy "de-individualizes" the person. Secret practitioners, according to the folk model, actually enjoy the terrorism and brutality of secret human organizations. Such a historical legacy makes the anthropologist extremely wary of the premises of secrecy for fear of being charged with ethnocentrism (or worse), a professional hazard of all scholars of secrecy. A few anthropologists, such as Eric Schwimmer (1980) and Simon Ottenberg (1989), have diverged from the conventional moralistic view, suggesting that ritual secrecy has its own cultural purpose and culture-creating meanings.

In thinking of the legacy of anthropology, and the lessons of Lewis Henry Morgan's work in particular, one is struck by how often anthropologists have rebelled against the Enlightenment and rationality ideologies in the narrow sense to espouse cultural relativism as it has come down to us

from Boasian cultural anthropology (Shweder 1984; Stocking 1997). The cultural relativist epistemology has been substituted for evolutionary and moralistic readings of cultural and social phenomena, even in the face of Western contradictions and utilitarian practicalities (Geertz 1984a; Spiro 1986). Skeptics are all too quick to point out the limitations of antirealist positions. However, there is one area in which anthropologists have generally forsaken cultural relativism, and the study of New Guinea ritual secrecy provides a textbook example. Why in this one area—secrecy—did anthropologists resist the acceptance of a social practice as part of cultural reality?

Anthropology's epistemological rebellion against the rationality of the Enlightenment widely embraced much that was strange, exotic, but human in the domain of customs and their cultural logic; and yet when it came to the practice of anthropology its professionals demurred, failing to accept secrecy as part of the positive and relativistic Science of Culture. There were other exceptions to this general trend, of course; certain notions of racism, homosexuality, and a few other forms of social inequality were pathologized with the result that the social oppression was maintained (Herdt 1991a). But in the arena of secrecy the conditions that thwarted relativism may be summarized as follows: (1) The field-workers in question were all men, or honorary men (e.g., Margaret Mead). (2) These ethnographers had little or no self-conscious experience of collective or ritual secrecy in their personal lives, at least in significant, nontrivial ways; the relevant exception in the instances of Hogbin and Read (homosexuality) was so derided and punished by society that it was virtually impossible for this cultural experience to be reflected upon in the fieldwork, and to do so would have disqualified these professionals, prior to the emergence of "gay and lesbian studies." Most of these men were uncomfortable with the explicit homosociality, and seeming homoerotic aspects, of the men's house in New Guinea. (3) To suggest that a male ethnographer accepted male ritual secrecy in a New Guinea society was to grant the men's separate cultural reality, thus qualifying the "unified concept" of culture then prevalent in anthropology. To take seriously the worlds of ritual secrecy anticipated the diversity studies that followed postcolonial perspectives on contemporary social formations. (4) Furthermore, to accept men's domination of women through the social practice of secrecy as relevant to New Guinea culture increasingly went against the grain of neoliberal democracy tendencies after the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, and the

establishment of feminist anthropology in largely White, heterosocial, highly educated, and bourgeois circles. (5) The acceptance of conditional masculinity through ritual secrecy was, in the cold war era of Western civilization at least, counterhegemonic, and would have called into question the essentializing privileges of being White, male, and middle class, in the elite. A male ethnographer who “understood” the subject-desire and positionality of being only a part-agent (like the boy initiated into ritual secrecy in a New Guinea men’s house) implied a counterhegemonic developmental subjectivity, whether of being homosexual or effeminate or neuter—or some such imaginal. And since interpretative anthropology had not yet been invented, the notion of agency implied in accepting conditional masculinity would have been suspect—strongly implying that the anthropologist was not a full agent in himself: that he, too, had once been an object (of attraction, desire, manipulation, etc.), rather than having always been a subject throughout life, consistent with Western male ideology right up to near the end of the cold war. (6) And so there emerged a generational difference between older and younger anthropologists who worked in these societies. The younger cohort was to follow up the implications of ritual secrecy as conditional masculinity, where men in public did things for the good of society, while in secret they did things for the good of themselves.

Ironically, of course, some of the male ethnographers of the prior generation (such as the American Robert Murphy) and those to follow in my generation were motivated by the neoliberal tendency to seek equality in gender relations and hence justice in society. This approach, aptly termed prefeminist or protofeminist, might well have been reflected in the cynicism toward male ritual secrecy in period ethnographies of New Guinea, and such a social and philosophical attitude is certainly discernible (Knauff 1995). However, as anthropologists following the lead of Marilyn Strathern have suggested, this paradigm avoided the deeper question of social analysis and political economy: How is male reality and masculinity as its social condition created? If not inherent in muscles and genes, from whence does male agentic power flow? Anthropology in the period of the cold war was not prepared to examine this question; second-wave feminism and gay and lesbian studies would have to be created, and a new generation of field-workers would begin to raise such questions.

However, to examine the protofeminist position, the assumption that men have power, or the ability to express it, assumes that male power is already inherent in nature, culture, or interpersonal relations, rather than

being dependent upon secrecy in the men's house, as I think was the case in precolonial Melanesia. As we have seen repeatedly in the comparative ethnography, that men had power did not automatically mean that they could rule; indeed, a strong central tendency in New Guinea cultures dominated by the men's house is that male ideologies emphasize the rhetorical power of men in public and in the social order. There is something almost compensatory in this rhetoric that the great ethnographers, such as K. E. Read, recognized in their fieldwork.

Yet male power as presented in Read's classic ethnographies, as well as the works of his peers, such as Ian Hogbin, and his student L. L. Langness (1974), is described as inherent, insistent, and incorrigible. Read (1965), as I have pointed out before (Herdt 1982a), understood the tentativeness or fragility of male identity development, as his beautiful ethnography portrays, but this sensibility was not inflected in his theoretical understanding of male power or the description of ritual secrecy as "hoax." In this view, male agency (the ability to be effective in life, and the subjective sense of being able to carry out goals) is not inherent in anything, except the men's ideology—and that only in public. Ritual secrecy was vital to make this rhetoric work in public. It commanded the socialization and solidarity of the males living in a particular men's house. Ritual secrecy is what made the achievement of male power a matter of praxis. While the evidence will never be untainted, our review of ethnographies (chap. 4) suggests that male ethnographers have consistently misinterpreted the public rhetoric of men as synonymous or isomorphic with secret male discourse and practice, as pointed out long ago (Herdt 1981). Some ethnographers continue to misunderstand how dependent male agency was upon ritual secrecy, as we see from Langness's (1999: 98) assertion that secrecy is a "charade"—some fifty years after Read first made this assertion.

The point is that this model (with its still-prevalent cheerleaders, e.g., Langness) precludes consideration of the more radical ontological position that ritual secrecy in the men's house was a tenuous but often successful effort to create male agency through an idealist or utopian cultural reality outside of public affairs. The men made rule in public and the men's house dependent upon ritual advancement through male secrets; thus all masculinity was qualified through the performance of ritual and secular demonstrations of "masculine" domains, such as hunting and shooting, ritual rhetoric, sexual prowess, and so forth. The fact that men continued to demonstrate and perform these functions well into old age suggested of

course that conditional masculinity is seldom if ever complete, or realized, and certainly was not inherent (Herdt 1982b).

Nevertheless, the men's success at waging war, at parlaying their alliances into larger confederacies of power relationships with other villages and men's houses, and hence at creating social reality or utopian worlds in the service of war-making, exacted a terrible human cost, one that neoliberalism was not willing to pay. It saw a situation where, in addition to the violence and constant stress of warfare, women and children were treated as objects, never as subjects. Moreover, their subjectivity was treated as irrelevant to the social order, and, having been marginalized and scapegoated in this way, it was virtually guaranteed that a vicious psychosocial process of "blame the victim" would ensue, in which women were imagined to be oppositional and destructive to men, their bodies the projective screens onto which the anxieties and dread of these fragile psyches were to direct their fear and hatred.

In taking this feminist critique seriously, however, we should critically examine its premises of victimology and the imagery of who is a victim and who is in power, to pursue an analysis of male power that too has often been overlooked in condemnation of the victimology (Harrison 1993). Finally, such a critique underanalyzes the cultural context of victims, and it too easily resulted in the dismissal of ritual secrecy—demeaning respect for the exigencies of agency and powerlessness in the politicosocial life of these communities. That this one-sided analysis has not struck us as odd is indicative of the great difficulties inherent not only in the study of secrecy but in the challenge to anthropological authority that is posed by it.

Anthropologists are faced with a double standard, as cultural natives of our own tradition, since secrecy at home is generally condemned for such reasons and more. With few exceptions, these attacks and their underside have seldom been adequately analyzed in social or cultural study. When anthropologists work abroad, on the other hand, they are placed in the ethical dilemma of having always to respect and honor the ways of the community, even those which might violate our own code of human conduct or human rights (Mitchell 1993). Sometimes the difficulties inherent in this latter posture lead to a variety of ethical dilemmas, which have been the subject of not a little attention in clinical ethnography, though seldom focused on secrecy as such (Herdt and Stoller 1990).

Past studies assumed that the purpose of the secret was to further the selfish or antisocial interest of individual actors. But with regard to ritual

secrecy in New Guinea, this point of view is wrongheaded, implying acts that are meant to exclude others, or to preclude social relations with them (those kept out of the secret), in favor of contracts that bind two people, lawyer and client, psychiatrist and patient, abuser and victim of abuse, in a hidden society of two. Ritual secrecy, by contrast, opens up social relations to initiated others, just as it forecloses other relations. And whereas contractual secrecy relations are based upon money and litigation, healing, and abuse, again, involving payments, not embodiments and dietetics in the larger sense used in this book, ritual secrecy relations are, to quote Godelier's new rendering of the gift, based upon things people "could neither sell nor give away but which must be kept" (1999: 8). Past interpretations of New Guinea ritual secrecy have conflated these forms with the contractual agreement in Western civilization. Where contractual secrecy surely secures or suggests self-interest, ritual secrecy ensures male agency in communities that have never known Western selfhood and whose collective insecurity makes social relations possible, in their utopian view, only through the reproduction of the men's house. This confusion of ontological forms in accounts of the past, I am convinced, is at the historical root of the romantic-cynical attack on secrecy in all its forms.

But this issue of "judging" or misjudging ritual secrecy as antisocial and even anticivilizational implicitly violates the modernist canon of cultural relativism in anthropology. *Societus non-nocere*: harm not the culture. Relativist anthropology is particularly troubled by the dark fear of judging other cultures by the values and beliefs of our own. Ritual secrecy, with its representation in past and present ethnography as dark, negative, cynical, selfish, and fraudulent, feeds right into this trouble, as Simmel (1950) might have warned long ago. Surely ritual secrecy must undermine public culture and society as good things in themselves. To recall Sapir's (1949) audacious effort from long ago is to ask what is genuine and worthy about a culture, about Culture for the human species, not only for understanding the human condition, but also in modeling the ideals of high civilization. Culture, Sapir could dare to say, in its most genuine and idealizing utopian mode—freedom loving, individual venerating, creative and inspiring of high art and philosophy as associated with Socratic Greece or Elizabethan England—was a good thing to emulate. This value-laden position was of course a strong challenge to epistemological relativism, and the prior generation of anthropologists, with exceptions (such as Kenneth Read), would not have typically agreed with such a sweeping view. But apart from

whether they would agree with such a universal model, it should be clear by now that many of them would not accept secrecy or ritual secrecy as part of this high civilization and idealized culture. This prior generation of anthropologists as members and natives of their own cultural tradition have been predisposed by their training and cultural history to think of secrecy as a bad thing.

### *Implications for the Position of Male Ethnographers*

Here, then, is the historical dilemma: How were anthropologists to describe and interpret a culture that could implement secrecy on purpose, and think of such a culture as a good thing? Certainly relativist anthropology could not accept the creation of cultural reality through ritual secrecy. In what remains I would like to pursue the acute implications of this dilemma for the position of male ethnographers and the masculinist perspective that underscores much of the ethnographic tradition of writing on ritual secrecy in male cults and ceremonies, understanding that recent ethnographies (Harrison 1993; Whitehouse 1992, 1995, 2000; Lattas 1999) have taken a new turn that departs from this anthropological past and theorizes secrecy quite differently.

There is a missing discourse on New Guinea men's secrecy: reflection by European male ethnographers as they attempted to perceive and define, sub-justify and interpret divergent realities, that made up sociality in these ritual secrecy-dominated communities, and to "translate" them back into Western discourse. How have male ethnographers typically handled this issue in the past? Largely, of course, by their silence on their positionality, which is true of kindred work in anthropology of the past. The problem goes beyond seeing ritual secrecy as a collective versus an individual problem.

Is it not a conundrum of our epistemology and a paradox of ethnographic methodology that Western male anthropologists confronted by systems of ritual secrecy had so little experience, need, or practical understanding of secrecy in their own developmental subjectivities and social lives? Of course it is true that, in growing up, men may have had the experience on occasion of having something to conceal—a white lie or petty wrong—that was experienced with guilt and was kept hidden. That is the trivial form of subjective contractual secrecy. Even the shared fantasies and erotic experiences of solitary development or shared homosociality for heterosexual men growing up in the United States (Gagnon 1971) do not

qualify, in my opinion, as a radical departure from the standard that all social experience of importance is public, not secret, especially following adolescence. Thereafter the actor enters a social world whose moral rules generally provide voluntary privacy as a sacrosanct right, but where secrecy is disapproved of or disliked as a strategy for social development.

However, these rather normative experiences and mundane assignments differ from the universal obligation in New Guinea to be initiated into the men's house, as the condition of being an adult, as the prerequisite of agency in being treated as a whole person struggling with the life and death stakes we have observed in these accounts of precolonial New Guinea. To live with these social and secret subversions and tests of conditional masculinity, and all the dissembling that comes with a double reality in daily life, is a great and even intolerable burden for someone unfamiliar with such matters (see chap. 3).

Only my lived experience of being a gay man, growing up in a heteronormal society that was predisposed to homophobia and thus the oppression of all signs of sexual variation, enabled me to gain a perspective, however inadequate, on this alternative cultural reality quite at odds with the public culture of Sambia. That I can write of this now in ways that Kenneth Read or Ian Hogbin could not—indeed, would have dreaded to raise in public due to their social upbringing and sense of propriety that absolutely separated their sexuality from society, public from private—is of course the result of incredible historical, cultural, and scientific change. To live as those who were closeted in the former generation had to live (Read 1980) dictated that they could not bring to bear into their ethnography the insights or reflections that might have expanded their interpretation of these conflicting cultural realities. Ritual secrecy as a practice and as power relations requires another mode of understanding that was missed or typically missing from the text: the difference of order between going to the theater to see a play versus writing and acting it every day for the audience. And playwrights, even good ones, suffer burn out.

But back to the mainstream of heteronormal white male anthropologists. Following this logic of social typification, I think that there is nothing surprising or mysterious about the assertion that White heterosexual men would have little experience of secrecy in their adult lives to fall back upon in understanding or reflecting upon the secret cultural realities and compartmentalization of their male friends and informants in New Guinea. Some of the greatest mainstream ethnographers of the past two

decades, such as Bruce Knauff, have been able to bridge this gap and achieve remarkable and sensitive descriptions of these issues, including the erotic and social desires of local men as instanced in Gebusi society (Knauff 1986, 1999). Perhaps this is an example of the remarkable power of anthropology to transcend the limitations of one's culture and developmental experience when motivated by theoretical and ethnographic concerns to truly reveal the Other. However, Knauff is rare; I know of no other mainstream example in the corpus of New Guinea. By contrast, there is the more prevalent claim, made iconic by a recent text of Langness (1999: 93) who asserts that "homosexuality . . . as reported by [Godelier, Herdt, and others] is in a sense only one trivial element" of a larger complex in New Guinea. Taken at face value, I would not quibble with that characterization, as I have myself stated elsewhere (Herdt 1993). However, that is not the face of the text, which conveys a deep heteronormativity that defies being punctured by twenty years of ethnography that, to quote Marilyn Strathern (1988: 115) so aptly, tells how "secrecy 'fixes' motivation"—privileging desires and categories of people, excluding others, making the men's claim to power "self fulfilling." This, for example, is why the boy-inseminating traditions of ritual secrecy in Melanesia are not trivial at all, but rather provide a deep insight into the unstable and insecure positionality of men and male agency in these societies.

Consider the element of heteronormativity in this dilemma. What is it? Of the many critiques that might be brought to bear (Herdt 1997a), the one that I would stress in this context is how being heterosexual or assuming that only heterosexual "things" are normal qualifies all relationships—with men and women. Since, according to that canon, "men" can only be "masculine" if they preclude intimate, homoerotic relations with other men, then it follows that to admit of such intimacy is to disrupt the appearance if not in fact the performance of masculinity, for such a man. A canonical heteronormal male, we might posit, must assert that ritual secrecy is a "charade," or if he guesses that it contains hidden and dangerous "fixed motives," such as sexual relations with younger males, it must be declared "trivial" in order to maintain the appearance of respectability, and certainly the mantle of masculinity. Triviality is here a signifier of the parallel problem of conditional masculinity that besets the Sambia and other kindred cultures of male desire reviewed in this book, wherein male agency is achieved through submission to the political and sexual socialization of older males. The contrasts are worth thinking through. Many heterosexual

White women, however, may be somewhat more attuned to noticing the difference between appearance and reality as a product of growing up in male-defined or patriarchal systems (Gilligan 1982). A European gay man or a lesbian who has had to pass as straight in growing up or perhaps through much of their lifetime is perfectly fitted to deconstruct these premises and this canon, as the autobiography of historian Martin Duberman (1991) suggests. Such a process is not without bias, of course; but then, as I long ago suggested, since all science is perspectival and anthropology as well requires the elucidation, not the elimination of bias, this assertion is pro forma of the ethnographic encounter (Herdt and Stoller 1990; see also Weston 1993). Secrecy may indeed be something that many heterosexual men have seldom, if ever, scrutinized: they may never have even pondered its interactional forms in their own society. By contrast, the nineteenth-century social world of men's clubs in which Lewis Henry Morgan found himself was perfectly suited to explore in a more open way the depth of how ritual secrecy could create cultural reality.

Another aspect of the problem concerns the assumptive privileges with which White male anthropologists grow up, feeling comfortable with power and authority, and thus agentic. Here it would seem is the very opposite of what I have been calling the "conditional masculinity" of pre-colonial New Guinea. As empowered agents whose masculinity is without conditions, EuroNorthAmerican and Australian anthropologists entered into New Guinea societies equipped to employ their power directly to achieve individual ends, including the goals of their research studies. This is reasonable—no news to postcolonial theory. In this model, EuroNorthAmerican male ethnographers might feel, however, comfortable to exercise their power with male contemporaries and consociates in the local moral world, but feel uncomfortable *reflecting* upon what this all means, including the coercive initiation of young males into prescriptive systems of power and sexual subordination in a society that has a system of conditional masculinity designed to operate through the use of ritual secrecy. Would American anthropologists such as Langness, who asserted that power was intrinsic and homosexuality trivial in these systems, feel comfortable investigating the blend of sexual subjectivity and secret contract of these males on the edges of society? It seems doubtful to me; but my point is larger than particular ethnographers. The exploitation of ritual secrecy is so characteristic of male agency in New Guinea societies that some anthropologists may have been led to assume that only duplicity and

fabrication, hoaxes and lies for personal gain, could motivate individual men's actions, and they would have been unprepared to reflect upon their own interpretation of these tactics, or the adequacy of such a cynical model in the light of their own discomfort with conditional intimate masculinity. The point is that the cynical view of secrecy often mistakes individual motives for the collective form, conflating contractual with ritual secrecy.

Some heterosexual males may counter, "But we have our own brand of secrecy in the locker room and, based upon the homosocial settings of boarding schools, boy scouts, boot camp, and fraternities—all of that we gave up after marriage!"—whereafter intimate bonding was transferred into the heterosocial-partnered relationship, that exclusive province of modernity for the self. Surely the attitude that attended this change in a prior generation (the generation, by the way, of Kenneth E. Read) was summed up aptly by Robert Graves: *Goodbye to All That!* For the male ethnographers of that generation, then, there was a hiatus, a developmental discontinuity between childhood/adolescence and marriage: after "social maturity," all secrets were set aside for the intimacy and privacy of intense, lifelong, marital bonding—a kind of social relationship relatively recent in human history. Surely the intimate secrecy of homosocial bonding—a pleasure in its own right for many of the actors in New Guinea men's societies, though unknown to some of these male ethnographers, at least after marriage—is a cause of misinterpreting ritual secrecy. I think that Lewis Henry Morgan was better equipped to understand this conundrum in the nineteenth century than later anthropologists because of the social economy and more formal gender relations of his times.

Another and perhaps more cynical view—best known to the Freudians—would have it that male anthropologists have something from their own past to hide, probably unconscious, which the ritual secrecy of a New Guinea men's group has disturbed, resulting in an overdetermined reaction to it, even a phobic relation to homosocial and especially, homoerotic feelings, tilting interpretation. This transference reaction—to overlook secrecy as if winking co-conspirators—again results in a different form of duplicity: condemning these as if they have absolutely no parallel in our own tradition and should not be compared to anything in our own cultural experience. This has a countertendency: to pardon the violation of women and children's lives, in what we in the West would call human rights. In either case, these conflicted interpretations of ritual secrecy depend upon the personal development and agency of the anthropologist, as much as the

inherited structures of gender power and political economy in which we operate.

Perhaps some ethnographers have a history of their own secret acts of one kind or another that might embarrass them. If so, they might have felt a vested interest (conscious or unconscious) in colluding with New Guineans—men or women, but usually men—in hiding the darker side of male bonding. This is speculation, of course, but it need not be treated as conspiratorial or malicious to see how, as a result of living in societies that privilege certain positional identities, privileged male actors come to be relatively unaware or even unconscious of their complicity with the compromised ethics of another people. But surely, based upon the work of this book and what is known from sexuality studies at large, sexual orientation is today an important part of the ability to reflect upon male power and the positionality inherent through secrecy. Nonetheless, the insidious denial continues, as observed in the following commentary by Australian anthropologist Jadran Mimica:

Regarding the issue of the sexual object-choice preference of the ethnographer, contra Herdt and some other gay anthropologists, the self declaration of one's sexual/gendered being (e.g., bi-, homo-, hetero-, third, fourth, n-th, two-spirit, no-spirit, etc.) makes a priori no difference as to the direction and depth of the exercise of self-critical understanding and transcendence as the basis of the project of ethnography. As a self-legitimizing strategy it is exactly that, hence its internal limitations. (2001: 236)

That a heterosexual White male ethnographer would regard sexual “preference” as a “choice” and deny its role in the interpretation of culture is a delicious absurdity.

Historically the reader wonders how such a moral worldview regarded secrecy and exploitation of women. While social solidarity and religion were important factors appealed to by Read's generation of structural-functional theories long ago, even in their day they were insufficient to explain ritual secrecy. What they omitted were the cultural and ontological realities of the genders and generational divide: an element of the ontological creation of reality among males and females in New Guinea village life that cannot be reduced to the neoliberal ethos, which appeals to such concepts as “justice” in the public domain. Indeed, my guess is that for the

Sambia and perhaps other New Guinea peoples, the male self-image is suggestive of the very core of ritual secrecy and embodiment, a utopian Ideal Man imagery (e.g., Godelier's notion of Great Man) that excludes other modalities of being and knowing, hence precluding such a concept as "justice." Here we have manliness as the cultural ideal that was combined—as an internal contradiction—with gendered ontologies of misogyny that stemmed from initiation. This secret discourse displaced the actors; their secret subjectivities made their sense of maleness, of masculinity, of agency conditional, limited, and always vulnerable. In this idealized, secret subjective sense of time, the scripts of the men are frozen in unequal subject/object relationships which displaced themselves as men and replaced them in the discursive frame of the men's house as "boys," thus casting themselves as forever the victim in a timeless social drama that they could not "win" against subversive, sophisticated, and sexy women (Gillison 1993). This is the objectification of the ontology of ritual secrecy; its psychocultural script if you like, as the socialization of secret male development provides for the Ideal Man growing up first in the women's house and later, protected by secret ritual practices, in the men's house. It is not so greatly divergent from the distant echo of American mainstream men today as to be unknowable.

Upon closer inspection, I suspect that it may have been this intimate and manly form of pleasure—here I mean the pleasure of mastery that derives from learning how to produce ritual secrecy—that misled such astute observers as Kenneth Read, Ian Hogbin, L. L. Langness, and others of their cohort to interpret the men's behavior as a hoax; while subsequent ethnographers, such as Barth, found in them a fabled and ill-fated search for Truth. Underlying the ritual secrecy in all these communities is the effort to anchor reality, to seek a means of building trust with one's fellows, in spite of the odds.

These ethnographies also suggest that observers in precolonial New Guinea societies often misunderstood the pleasure that boys and men felt in becoming objects of desire for other men and for women and in learning how to properly perform the rituals, by taking that pleasure to be an inauthentic, bastard form of masculinity. A prior generation, before feminism and the gay movement, reasoned that New Guinea men could not desire each other in these ways. The anthropologist may have misinterpreted that such a desire could only make them into "homosexuals," a category that did not exist in New Guinea precolonial society (Herdt 1993).

And since these men were not effeminate, but rather intensely masculine by the standards of the Western worldview of the cold war period, there must be another explanation: given that these societies lacked “homosexuality,” the secrets themselves must therefore be a lie or a farce. But this objection ignored the local theory of desire and made the men’s secrecy—the Ideal Man that only the men could know about—into a negation of culture. A totally different, more culturally relative approach would have been to interpret the ritual secrecy as the very means of the production and reproduction of a more contradictory cultural reality than that of their own Western society. In the men’s house sexual subjectivity of the Ideal Man, the imagery divides the world along different lines: not public and private, as in the Western frame, but public and ritual secrecy, with objects and their meanings anchored in both spheres, and “truth” a nebulous and shifting discursive frame of memory (Whitehouse 2000). It was easy to misjudge this split between social solidarity of the total society and the deceit of the women and children as “the” split between truth and lie, in a rhetoric of neoliberal democracy alien to these societies and their men’s house tradition.

I would not like to be placed in the position of ethically defending the traditional practices and beliefs found in New Guinea; this is not an apology for them, nor is that required of me. I know that contractual secrecy can under certain conditions protect human life. I believe that in order to understand the role of the ethnographer’s subjectivity as an element in the interpretation of culture and power, we ought to know about the sexuality of the anthropologist, which is of course far more complex than being either a “choice” or merely a “biological given,” as the Mimicas and popular culture might like to think. But I am aware of the terrible human cost exacted by ritual secrecy in New Guinea and contractual secrecy in many arenas today in the United States: although survival for a time can be assured by the protections of secrecy, the cost may be great suffering long afterward.

But while we in Western neoliberal democracies may object to secret rituals, and, indeed, our objections may be well grounded in humanistic and compassionate reason, it is not our right to oppose these customs in their own land. It is too easy to moralize and condemn that part of pre-colonial New Guinea, the more so as secrecy seems so exotic and so much at odds with us—an Otherness that is cruel and grotesque, not at all what Lewis Henry Morgan found in such traditions. Too easy, that is, to collude

with the colonial domination of these customs and by critique assume that these customs and their purveyors should be removed or at least reformed (Lattas 1999). But we now know—thanks to the nineteenth-century history of Morgan—that such a view is shortsighted. To admit that our own recent cultural history biases us to chide or dismiss ritual secrecy because we have forgotten this part of our own past—not just anthropology's past, if not indeed a more distant developmental social history—is part of the means by which we should seek to understand, and then if necessary to defend, these non-Western traditions against their detractors from the outside, especially from the attacks of Western agents such as missionaries.

To me, the most important and wonderful gift of ethnography in New Guinea has been to capture that extraordinarily precious and momentary disjunction of time and space when the subjects and objects of ritual secrecy were suddenly inverted and made transparent to the eyewitness. No longer were they simply a part of what is “natural” to the cultural history and conventionality, as we saw so acutely among the Iahita Arapesh (chap. 5). This critical moment is when actors begin to reflect upon their own objects of ritual action—whether cult practices, ritual masks, Tambaran spirits, boy initiates, or women spectators—either reproducing or becoming cynical, even laughing at their own traditions. A generation later they may become nostalgic over what was lost or, as in the case of the Yagwoia, yearn for an Other to whom to narrate this vanishing tradition. In such examples the ritual secrecy reflects back to a people their contradictions, the public/secret split, the subjectivities hidden in the past—a distant, even forgotten sense of cultural reality. These native observers may become the worst critics of what is now seen no longer as genuine culture but as spurious—as cardboard power. Perhaps they begin to view what was once a matter of absolute faith in the sacred and divine as fake and contrived, or—even worse—as the petty ambitions of what small men do to seem bigger. “People reinvent the civilizing process by making it partly their own, and it is part of their project of making themselves at home in which their identities and their world have both been severely problematized” (Lattas 1999: 314).

It is such a wondrous and dreadful thing to witness, this turn of conventional cultural realities: the sudden and definite realization that a whole way of life lacked the feared sacred power and merit of the gods attributed to it. The rage released by this insight is terrifying and can barely be reck-

oned with, as shown in the account of the Sambia and Yagwoia narratives (chap. 4). Only the word *pathos* is sufficient to capture the fury and despair of a people after the fall of ritual secrecy. Of all the emotions observed at the time, however, rage and grief are among them, reminding us of Freud's (1913) incredible insight that those who grieve for the dead would also like to attack and destroy the remains of those they once loved. But how is this possible, and how can it be reconciled with the real love once felt for the desired object? Freud's answer, of course, was to understand that humans are often ambivalent, and they press their aggressive tendencies against the object that they feel has abandoned them at their hour of greatest need. Anthropologists, however, are not satisfied with such a psychologicistic answer; we understand the shattering of social worlds as complex processes, leaving shards in their wake, the elements of ritual and myth scattered across vast regions in mosaic and disguised cultural forms (Lévi-Strauss 1974).

The rage may take as its object the human objects of action, the boy-initiates and women who were marginal to ritual secrecy. But it may then be directed toward the very objects of desire formerly identified with the cult itself—its masks and paraphernalia, its spirits, even the god Tambaran: that he cheated and failed and died!—and failed to protect the male believers from the antisecrecy rhetoric in the dreadful aftermath. Indeed, the detractors of the men's cult suggest that the Tambaran was feeble enough to be rendered impotent by puny European agents and a handful of missionary zealots. More than a century of cargo cults in this area of the world carry in their history this rage and effort at cultural renewal.

The effort to capture all of this desolation of the human spirit in our ethnographies is a monumental task for anthropology, and many shirk from it, because we are not immortals, either. Hovering over our shoulder all throughout the process is that faint accusation of our long tradition: "This secrecy is a sham." To reflect upon this avalanche of cultural change is daunting, and the anthropologist may experience wanting to walk away from the desolation of it all, much as Lewis Henry Morgan seemed long ago to have walked away from the ritual secrecy projects of his youth. Confronting these contrary impulses in the task of doing and writing ethnography is what is required to deal with the larger social ethics of describing and interpreting the demise of secrecy in these magnificent cultures.

To contest these realities from the Western point of view is problematic, because it threatens to repeat—recapitulate, in another form, and

another time—what occurred in the colonial encounter. It is not our right but rather the right of local actors and their communities to work out these historical formations and their contradictions in their own way. We must resist the temptation to place ourselves in the position of the deposed Tambaran and say what is right or wrong about the old ways. It is more ethical for anthropology to respect these complex historical realities and leave it to local communities to find their own Morgans and reformers who will reclaim dignity as they come to define it for themselves.